

School victims

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School Victims: An Analysis of 'My Worst Experience in School' Scale

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Abstract

Although the media has highlighted some traumatic consequences of school bullying, such as victim suicide, and research has shown the negative effects of bullying, the long term traumatic consequences have not been as well researched. The literature generally considers school victims to be bullied by peers, however, it has been demonstrated that some trauma to students in schools involves teachers and other school personnel (Hyman & Snook, 2000). A unique aspect for this study, is that it explored school trauma beyond an understanding of specific situations and locations in which bullying occurred to a more comprehensive view of types of trauma experienced by students. The Student Alienation and Trauma Scale-Revised (SATS-R, 2002) was used with 95 undergraduates to develop bullying profiles. It was found that although peers were involved in most respondents' worst school experience, a significant proportion of worst school experiences remembered by participants involved teachers. Negative social situations rather than negative physical experiences were the most recalled. The implications for teachers and schools are discussed.

Bullying of Children

The extensive literature relating to the bullying of school age children can be examined under two major categories, namely bullying by peers and bullying by adults.

Peer Bullying in Schools

Numerous surveys of students have found that bullying by peers in school is a frequent experience for many children (Genta, Menesini, Fonzi, Costabile, & Smith, 1996; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Whitney & Smith, 1993). One in six children report being bullied at least once a week (Rigby, 1997; Zubrick et al., 1997) although that figure was as high as 50% if the duration of the bullying is taken as lasting only one week (Smith & Shu, 2000). Forty percent of adolescents reported having been bullied at some time during their schooling (Mynard, Joseph & Alexander, 2000). However, the percentage of students who have reported longer term bullying of 6 months or more decreases to 15-17% (Slee, 1995; Slee & Rigby, 1993).

There is a higher incidence of reported bullying by peers in primary than in secondary schools (Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991) and most studies have shown that boys and girls report similar levels of victimisation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Smith & Shu, 2000). However, some studies report more boys being bullied than girls (Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1992; Rigby, 1997; Rigby & Slee, 1991).

Further, research has shown that there are different kinds of bullying which are often gender specific. For example, physical bullying has been shown to be more prevalent among younger children than older (Whitney & Smith, 1993) and boys identify being more overtly physically bullied than girls (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001). Girls report more relational victimisation, socially hurtful behaviours, exclusion and teasing (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000). Verbal bullying has also been shown to be a significant form of peer victimisation in schools (Whitney & Smith, 1993).

The consequences of bullying have been found to be increased levels of depression, anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms in victims (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen, & Rimpela, 2000; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Neary & Joseph, 1994; Roland, 2002). The bullied students also feel more socially ineffective, have greater interpersonal difficulties (Craig, 1998; Forero, McLellan, Rissel, & Baum, 1999) together with higher absenteeism from school and lower academic competence (Rigby, 1997; Zubrick et al., 1997). However, it is still unclear if these symptoms are antecedents or consequences of bullying (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Roland, 2002). Thus, while bullying may be the cause of some of these difficulties, the difficulties could also cause some students to be bullied (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000). Recent research has however, examined the consequences of bullying by investigating the occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms after bullying incidents (Mynard et al., 2000; Rosser, 2002).

As a consequence of the incidence of peer bullying many schools have instigated anti-bullying programs in the last 15 years, ranging from individual

counselling of victims, mediation between bullies and victims through to whole school approaches (Cross et al., 2003; Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994; Peterson & Rigby, 1999; Rigby, 2002; Smith & Shu, 2000; Stevens, Bourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2001).

However, there is a lack of longitudinal studies examining the longer term consequences of bullying (Mynard et al., 2000). The one exception being Olweus (1993) who showed that victims of school bullying can continue to suffer from anxiety, depression and poor self-esteem into adulthood. One method to ascertain long-term effects of bullying is by retrospective reports of school bullying by adults. Therefore, it is interesting to ask students what they remember as most affecting them some years after they have left school. Another question of considerable interest is “Are the perpetrators of bullying always peers?”

Adult Bullying in Schools

Recently, bullying by adults has become recognised as an important issue (Smith, Singer, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003). Most research on adult bullying behaviour has been carried out in the workplace with studies involving mental health workers (Stein, Hoosen, Brooks, Haigh & Christie, 2002), prison officers (Vartia & Hyyti, 2002), civil servants (Lee, 2002) and nurses (Quine, 2001). However, there has been a scarcity of research with teachers. Not only would it seem in hierarchal bureaucracies such as schools, that there may be workplace bullying amongst adults, there may also be bullying of students by teachers.

Some authors have suggested that schools can alienate students (Kagan, 1990; Thornton, 2002). Hyman and colleagues in the United States have been investigating victimisation of students by school staff (Hyman & Perone, 1998). They found that the majority of students experience verbal maltreatment by teachers at some time in their school life (Hyman & Weiler, 1994; Hyman, Zelikoff, & Clarke, 1988). Students surveyed reported that they had experienced varying degrees of stress as a result of maltreatment by educators (Hyman & Snook, 2000). Olweus (1996) also found that 10% of a sample of 5,100 Norwegian elementary and junior high school teachers overtly bullied one or more students on a regular basis. Fifty percent of victimised high school students surveyed in the United States identified bullying by an educator as their worst school experience, while the others identified a peer as the perpetrator (Snook, 2001). In addition, fifty-one percent of high school students with learning disabilities reported that teachers caused their worst experience in school with only 23% saying it was a peer who was involved (Aldrete-Phan, 2002). Investigation of victimisation of pupils by Israeli school staff revealed that almost a quarter of secondary school students reported emotional maltreatment by a staff member, while almost a fifth reported being a victim of physical maltreatment from a teacher (Benbenishty, Zeira & Astor, 2002). Primary students in Israel reported a higher incidence of maltreatment by staff, with almost a third reporting emotional maltreatment by teachers during the previous month with more than a fifth reporting physical maltreatment (Benbenishty, Zeira, Astor & Khoury-Kassabri, 2002). Further, results of a survey in Greece indicated that although peers were most involved in student victimisation, teacher involvement was significant (Petropoulos & Papastilianou, 2001 cited in Halkias et al., 2003). The important finding in this study

was that any bullying or bad experience involving a teacher was perceived as far more hurtful than bullying by a peer.

In retrospective surveys, 60-86% of adult subjects claimed to have had a traumatic school experience involving teachers (Zelikoff & Hyman, 1987). In another recent retrospective survey utilising “My Worst School Experience Scale” with university students in Greece, educators were reported by 49% of respondents to have caused their worst school experience, with peers causing 30% (Halkias et al., 2003).

The literature on peer bullying shows that there are different types of bullying and these are referred to as verbal, psychological, relational or physical (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). The main worries in adults have been shown to be fear of negative social outcomes (Ladouceur, Freeston, Fournier, Dugas & Doucet, 2002; Lovibond & Rapee, 1993). That is, most adults worry about being embarrassed, not being accepted or making a social faux pas. This is shown by the reluctance of most adults to engage in public speaking, to walk to the front seat after the lecture has begun or to sing in public. This is also true for children (Campbell & Rapee, 1994). Campbell (1996) has also shown that contrary to most opinion, social anxiety does not change with age in children and adolescents. In the study by Halkias et al (2003) it was found that university students reported that embarrassment was the worst thing that had happened to them at school as a result of either peer or teacher victimisation. The most frequent of the reported worst school experiences were of a psychological rather than a physical assault by either educators or peers.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Based on the recollections of adults, who are the perpetrators of their worst experience in school, peers or teachers?
2. Do the recollections of adults' bad experiences in schools reflect a greater incidence of social or physical experiences?
3. Are the recollections of adults' worst school experience related to a specific school context? That is, are these experiences more prevalent in primary school, as is the case for peer bullying, or in secondary school and are there differences in the frequency and types of bullying in public and private schools in Australia?

Methodology

This paper reports on one section of a larger study that examined university students' recollected worst experiences in school and the consequences of this experience. The study is part of a large international research project examining students' worst experiences in school and post traumatic stress disorder symptoms.

Participants

Ninety-five students in an education course at an Australian university completed the Student Alienation and Trauma Scale (SATS-R). The students had

completed a bachelor's degree in various disciplines and were beginning a postgraduate education course to enable them to enter the teaching profession. Seventy-five were female (78.9%). The mean age was 27.1 years with a range of 18 years to 54 years.

Measure

The Student Alienation and Trauma Scale (SATS-R) (Hyman, Berna, Snook, DuCette & Kohr, 2002) was used in this study. This scale contains two parts. Part I is based on My Worst School Experience Scale (MWSES; Hyman, Zelikoff, & Clarke, 1988) which was originally designed for students to report their worst school experience caused by an educator but in a recent revision also addresses issues of peer victimisation. Part II lists stress symptoms based on the School Trauma Survey (Hyman, Zelikoff & Clarke, 1988). Both parts have been combined and renamed the Student Alienation and Trauma Scale- Revised (SATS-R; Hyman et al., 2002).

Part I of the SATS-R was used in this study (My Worst School Experience Scale for College Students). After questions on demographics that were adapted for Australian use, there were 58 statements concerning bad experiences such as, "I was teased", "I was hit", with a five-point response scale of frequency ranging from 'Did not happen', 'One time', 'A few times', 'More than a few times', 'A lot' and 'All of the time'. A second column asked the respondent to indicate if a student, teacher or both was involved in each incident. Each respondent was then asked to circle their worst experience from the 58 statements. Additionally, respondents were asked to write a brief written description of the worst experience they had had in school.

Procedure

All participants agreed to participate by signing a consent form after a lecture in introductory educational psychology. Ethical approval was obtained from the university and participation was voluntary. The researcher read out the standardised administration instructions and handed out the surveys.

Results

Research Question 1 Based on the recollections of adults, who are the perpetrators of their worst experience in school, peers or teachers?

Overall 68.8% of the respondents reported that peers only were involved in recollected bad experiences, while 21.2% reported that teachers only were involved. Ten percent of respondents reported that both students and teachers were involved in bad experiences at school. In the written description of their single worst school experience, 29.5% of respondents described a situation that was caused by a teacher, 64.2% described a situation that was caused by a peer or peers, with 5.3% indicating both (1% of missing data).

Both males (75.1%) and females (66.5%) indicted that peers were involved in more bad incidents than teachers.

Research Question 2 Do the recollections of adults' bad experiences in schools reflect a greater incidence of negative social or physical outcomes?

Overall the ten most frequently occurring bad experiences were more negative social outcomes than physical outcomes. Table 1 shows the frequency by gender.

Insert Table 1 about here

Males indicated in their descriptions of their worst experience that it was a negative social situation (65%), although they often reported that even if the experience was physical it caused them more embarrassment than a physical consequence. For example, a 34-year-old male recalled after breaking his arm in the playground, that the principal commented on his lack of muscle. While the broken arm was OK, the comment was hurtful still from such a figurehead in the school. A 29-year-old male reported that the hitting and shoving by the teacher was bad, not just embarrassing but humiliating in front of the whole class. Females also indicated in their descriptions that it was a mainly negative social outcome (74.7%) that caused their worst school experience. For example, females recollected that they were teased about their appearance, developing early, being short, wearing glasses, having red hair, being ostracised for being intelligent or finding it difficult to make friends at a new school. For males there were four physical outcomes in the ten most frequently reported incidents. For females all ten of the most frequently reported outcomes were of a social nature.

Research Question 3 Are the recollections of adults' worst school experience related to a specific school context? That is, are these experiences more prevalent in primary school, as is the case for peer bullying, or in secondary school and are there differences in the frequency and types of bullying in public and private schools in Australia?

About half of the respondents recollected that their worst experience happened in primary school (55.8%) while for 43.2% it happened in secondary school. Further, significantly more respondents indicated that teachers had caused their worst school experience in primary school rather than in secondary school ($\chi^2, (1)=7.00, p<.01$). There was no difference between males and females in this recollection. There were also no age differences found in any of the analyses.

The proportion of students in the sample who attended public (62.1%) and private schools (37.9%) was similar to the proportion of all students attending public (68.4%) and private schools (31.6%) in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). There were no significant differences between respondents who attended public and private schools in reporting if a teacher caused their worst experience in school ($\chi^2 (1)=0.57, ns.$).

Discussion

Adults' recollections of their bad experiences in school and their worst school experience in Australia mainly involved peers. However, many respondents reported

that their worst school experience involved teachers. This proportion of about 30% of incidents involving teachers is quite low compared to respondents in America. In a similar retrospective study, Zelikoff and Hyman (1987) found that 60-86% of adult subjects claimed to have had a traumatic school experience involving teachers. However, the study did not ask for only one worst experience. Snook (2001) found that 50% of high school students reported peer bullying as their worst school experience and 50% reported that educators were the cause of the outcome. Halkias et al. (2003) used My Worst School Experience Scale with university students and found that 49% reported educators to have caused their worst school incident with only 30% reporting peer involvement, almost an exact reversal of the data found in this sample in Australia. In contrast, the Australian data is similar to school students' reports of teacher victimisation in Israel (Benbenishty, et al., 2002).

It is difficult to know why these cultural differences have occurred. Both the Greek and Australian participants were of similar ages and the data were collected retrospectively. Perhaps in America the continued use of physical punishment in schools might explain why teachers were reported to be more involved than peers. However, in Greece, corporal punishment is illegal, as it is in Australian schools, although Halkias et al. (2003) reported that in practice it is still used to punish disobedient students in Greek schools. Given that the majority of remembered worst experiences of both Greek and Australian university students were of a social nature, then this might not be a plausible explanation. Perhaps as future educators themselves, the Australian students did not see teachers as negatively as the Greek students, or because of more positive recollections chose teaching as a profession. In addition, there could be differences in child-rearing practices where society implicitly condones

the use of emotional or psychological as well as physical punishment (Shumba, 2002). Further research with different samples of adults is needed.

Even though the proportion of respondents for whom teachers were reported as the cause of their worst school experience was small, it is still of concern. It has been shown that the relationship between teachers and students is vitally important. For both at risk and successful students, school experiences and self-image were closely connected to the quality of relationships with teachers (Kramer, 1990). Just one teacher who uses emotional abuse in classroom management has the potential to distress many students (Krugman & Krugman, 1984). The implications for teacher pre-service training and inservice for practising teachers is clearly important. Classroom behaviour management techniques, the importance of building good relationships with students, and stress management techniques all have a critical place. The finding however, also supports the continued need for peer anti-bullying programs to be conducted in schools.

Both male and female respondents reported that their worst experience in school was of a negative social situation rather than a negative physical situation. The most frequently reported bad experiences for both males and females were being teased, embarrassed and being yelled at. This finding supports research that shows the main worry of adults, children and adolescents is fear of negative social outcomes (Campbell & Rapee, 1994). The finding is also similar to the remembered worst school experiences of Greek university students (Halkias et al., 2003) and to Israeli students' reports (Benbenishty et al., 2002). These results have implications for the way teachers are trained in behaviour management procedures and how schools create

safe, supportive environments for learning to reduce both peers and teachers causing extreme embarrassment and humiliation to students.

Although there were no significant gender differences in reporting that peers or teachers were involved in their worst school experience at school, males did report more negative physical experiences than females. Males reported more frequently than females that they were pushed, punched or tripped. Females reported only negative social situations in the ten most frequently supported statements. These recollected experiences support research findings with school students in which boys report more physical bullying by peers than girls (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001). However, similar to the Greek study (Halkias et al., 2003), males also reported that the embarrassment that the physical experience engendered was worse than the physical pain of the situation.

These findings also support research with school age children that has consistently reported that younger children in primary school state they are bullied more than adolescents in secondary school (Rigby, 1997). Slightly more than half the adults in this study recollected that their worst school experience happened in primary school. It is interesting to note however, that significantly more respondents reported teacher victimisation in primary school than secondary school, similar to Israeli students. Perhaps the questionnaires asking primary students about bullying do not usually distinguish between peer and teacher victimisation.

One limitation of this study is that methodologically it is retrospective and not longitudinal. This could effect the accuracy of the respondents' recall. However,

Brewin, Andrews and Gotlib (1993) found that adults' recollection of their childhood experiences are generally accurate, especially if the experience was unexpected and of some consequence to the individual. In addition, Berscheid (1994) concluded that emotion provoking events are also well remembered. Further, both Rivers (2001) and Smith, et al. (2003) have reported a reasonably good accuracy and stability of memories of school bullying incidents. A second limitation of the study is the small sample size and consequently the results should be treated with some degree of caution. A third limitation relates to the fact that the sample consisted of teacher trainees. Further research is required to establish whether the results from the current study would be replicated with adult samples drawn from other contexts.

In summary, while peers were involved in more negative recalled experiences in school than teachers, the proportion of 30% of teachers causing worst experiences in schools is still of concern and interest and needs further investigation. Further research on teacher workplace bullying is also warranted. The findings of this study point to the continued need to address peer bullying in schools as well as providing teachers with programs to sensitise them to the harm that negative social situations can have on some students. Schools need to continue to strive to be places that engender a feeling of safety and support for the whole school community.

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Table 1.

The Ten Most Frequently Occurring Bad Experiences

Males	(mean)	Females	(mean)
I was teased	3.05	I was teased	2.65
I was embarrassed	2.60	I was embarrassed	2.64
I was yelled at	2.15	I was yelled at	1.72
I was given detention	2.00	I was picked last	1.52
I was chased	1.75	Other students stopped talking to me	1.48
I was pushed	1.65	Someone got others not to like me	1.44
I was punched	1.65	I was left out	1.35
I got in trouble for something I did	1.60	Someone made fun of my clothes	1.35
I was picked last	1.55	Someone made up a story about me	1.27
I was tripped	1.55	I got in trouble for something I did	1.19